

## THE PERPLEXING PARADOX OF PROGRESS

Rev. Jaco B. ten Hove—Cedars UU Church, Bainbridge Island, WA—Aug. 8, 2010

**READING** From a 2006 book by Gary T. Gardner, published by Worldwatch Institute:  
*Inspiring Progress: Religions' Contributions to Sustainable Development...*  
[<http://www.worldwatch.org/node/4404>]

“A major problem in industrialized countries is the largely unquestioned assumption that greater wealth is the ticket to enhanced well-being... The two are not mutually exclusive, of course; it's clear that wealth often expands people's options for well-being. But which goal is given the lead in an economy will strongly influence what the economy, and the community or society it supports, look like. A new vision of progress in the 21st century will require giving well-being the prominence and attention it lacked in the last century...

“In general, a well-being society would feature greater interaction among family, friends, and neighbors and more attention to finding fulfillment and creative expression than to accumulating goods. The goal would be to reduce the stresses—on people, communities, and the environment—that characterize life in many industrial societies today, and to achieve a deeper sense of life satisfaction than many people report experiencing today...

“People pursuing a life of well-being often invest in relationships. Harvard Professor of Public Policy Robert Putnam has written that “the single most common finding from a half century's research... is that happiness is best predicted by the breadth and depth of one's social connections.” Being socially connected has been shown to be good for one's health—the chance of dying in a given year, no matter the cause, is 2–5 times greater for isolated than for socially connected people—and for success in small businesses, where trust, reciprocity, and information networks grease the wheels of commerce.

“In sum, a well-being society would approach the question of progress with a new set of priorities and yardsticks. It would be consistent with the wisdom of Enrique Peñalosa, the mayor who set out to remake Bogotá (Columbia) into a city of well-being. He was fond of commenting that “A city is successful not when it's rich, but when its people are happy.” It would ask the fundamental question: why create economies that do not deliver what people ultimately want? Why not design them to deliver what makes people happy?

“By nurturing relationships, facilitating healthy choices, learning to live in harmony with nature, and tending to the basic needs of all, societies can shift from an emphasis on consumption to an emphasis on well-being. This could be as great an achievement in the 21st century as the tremendous advances in opportunity, convenience, and comfort were in the 20<sup>th</sup>.” [Pgs. 107, 110, 113]

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SONG: *Turning of the World* (Ruth Pelham)

Let us sing this song for the TURNING of the world, that we may TURN as one.  
With every voice, with every song we will move this world along,  
And our lives will feel the echo of our TURNING.  
[...Let us sing this song for the LOVING... for the HEALING...]

The year: 2010.

The challenge: to help this world “turn as one” toward love and healing—essentially *from* over-consumption and *toward* well-being.

The linguistic curiosity: could two words have more dynamic difference?

“Well-being” may be the best name for the greatest good shared by the greatest number, a simple if elusive ideal. “Consumption,” on the other hand, has harsh trace elements from the era when tuberculosis ravaged our kind. Definitions of the word *consumption* include “a wasting disease” and “the using up of a resource.” Uggh.

Yet, consume is what we Americans do, at a rate unparalleled in human history. And at almost every turn we are enticed to do so by a stunningly effective advertising and media industry, because without a steadily increasing growth in consumption of manufactured products, our economy will grind to a halt.

This, at least, is the assumption currently driving much of our cultural behavior. “Progress,” as we have generally come to understand it, means perpetual economic growth and ever-higher standards of living—“onward and upward forever,” presumably toward greater happiness. But as the graph below depicts, the past half-century of rising income has not, at least statistically, led to an increase in very happy people. [Gardner, Gary T. *Inspiring Progress: Religions’ Contributions to Sustainable Development*, Worldwatch Institute. 2006. Pg. 108.]



There's no doubt or argument that the 20<sup>th</sup> century *did* greatly expand opportunities for health and wealth and, presumably, happiness. Material well-being *did* improve by leaps and bounds for many. Significant progress, for sure, by lots of measures. *And* that most recently completed century was a double-edged sword—also far and away the most violent and environmentally destructive period on record, with the most skewed extremes of wealth and poverty as well. [Ibid, pg. 23.]

It's no wonder our growing incomes have not made us correspondingly happier, as the communications revolution has also made it easier to be more aware of all the injustice, strife and struggle the world over. I push it all away, perhaps, but in my heart of hearts, I know what's going on, and it plagues my soul.

So I was encouraged to discover this book called *Inspiring Progress: Religions' Contributions to Sustainable Development*, from which I've drawn liberally and gratefully for this sermon. Author Gary Gardner, whom I've met, is Director of Research at Worldwatch Institute, one of the most articulate and well established of global institutions.

A helpful metaphor he uses to describe the impressively innovative 20<sup>th</sup> century is of a river with no banks, flowing in creativity, but unchanneled. Two kinds of missing riverbanks, which might otherwise have helped steer things more fairly, are ecological wisdom and an ethic of well-being. [Ibid, pg. 23.] But any 20<sup>th</sup> century voices of realistic restraint were drowned out and overrun by a flood of economic expansion and materialism.

Nonetheless, it's not hard to see now that that expansion, while providing some with outstanding material comforts like never before, has consumed global resources to such a degree and with such lousy management that a United Nations report summed it up in crystal clear and specifically economic terms this way:

**“...the benefits reaped from our engineering of the planet have been achieved by running down natural capital assets.”** [Ibid, pg. 29.]

Not a radical statement, but with radical implications nonetheless. One local arena where the result of our nearsighted engineering and profligate habits is coming home to roost, literally, is waste disposal, which is very much in our backyards, including mine.

Barbara and I live in a 21-unit cottage community in Winslow with a shared garbage area that is regularly misused by unknown residents. There are some among us, maybe you know the type, who ignore the relatively simple instructions to separate recycling, yard waste, cardboard and garbage. They persist in dumping whatever wherever, which too frequently results in either contamination of the recycling or rejection by the haulers, costing us more.

Maybe you're also aware that when we throw things away, there's really no "away" anymore, and we have to think about this when we create and process waste of any kind, in any setting. But some folks don't seem to have the capacity to grasp the concept. It's like their worldview just doesn't allow for caring about what happens to their garbage. "Out of sight, out of mind" is all they can manage.

Waste disposal is just one in a long litany of dramatic indicators of distress in our global and local systems, *and* there is an equally long list of all the valuable advances that have been made in recent decades. It is a perplexing paradox, this notion of "progress." It seems to beg a balance sheet, with some sort of final conclusion about whether, on the whole, things have, in fact, "progressed," given all the pluses *and* minuses.

Such an assessment would no doubt depend on where the assessor sits. But those of us who would call ourselves "progressives"—as in, proponents of progress—might want to be able to provide some reasonable accounting for the implications of that mantle. I know I have tossed around the label "progressive" without really thinking about its meaning.

So I believe that what's called for is at least clarification and, as necessary, redefinition of what counts as progress. Every generation does this anyway, as we reformulate our values for each new age; the question is whether we, right here right now, have the capacity, the will, the courage to do it with visionary intention, or instead just passively let the corporate wonks of Wall Street and the media manipulators on Madison Avenue do it for us.

A pertinent, if harsh metaphor might be the old frog in hot water scenario: drop a critter into boiling water and it'll leap right out, but turn the heat up slowly on a frog in tepid water, and it will stay put without noticing its impending fate until too late.

I say let's be real about the hot water we're in and set about actively redefining—and demanding—what we WANT to count as progress for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so that it might better reflect the values that really matter to us. Allow me to now offer some hopeful suggestions in that direction, as seen through an avowedly liberal religious lens.

If we are to turn the world toward more unity, love and healing, toward increased individual and community well-being (the greatest good shared by the greatest number), here's a beginning list of what I believe “progress” should look like. I've grouped four general categories of items into a hopefully handy acronym: the word “SEND,” as in “Let us SEND a new message to the future,” and I'll draw each one out in turn.

First up, appropriately enough, is S for **SPIRIT**, a *religious* angle on what I think healthy progress could look like. Most religions lift up the value of cooperation and community in one way or another, so let's focus on that for progress. Almost any increase in local cooperation will strengthen the fabric of community, and thus, I predict, help a lot of other unsavory dynamics melt away. And the experience of cooperation and meaningful community will lift almost anyone's spirit.

Religiously motivated volunteerism has long been a large, if relatively silent factor in building what is called the “social capital” of a community. [Ibid, pg. 52.] Social capital is a commodity, if you will, on which a whole other kind of very progressive economy could be grounded. Let's do better at growing and measuring our “social capital” as an indication of healthy progress, which is kind of what our Cedars member and Bainbridge Councilor Barry Peters is trying to do by gathering various sorts of indicators and baseline measurements to show how we're doing as a community striving toward ever greater well-being.

Getting different faith communities to cooperate on worthy local projects is some of the most powerful medicine available. It's not easy, of course, or it would be done a lot more often, but it holds great hope. I think religions can find very fruitful common ground, for instance, by joining together to help moderate the allure of consumption and materialism. We can also, together, spread a deeper sense of the sacredness of our local ecosystems.

Interfaith collaboration points toward a kind of progress that will be very important for a healthy planet. Meanwhile, some of us here are just now establishing a project called “SOULful Cedars” that will contribute our UU religious leadership to the growing local energy conservation movement. (SOUL stands for “Sustainable Outcomes in Unity and Love.”) Let me know if you want to get in on that.

One final religious angle for now: there is a large, relatively untapped field of support for progress toward the common good, that being financial investments by religious people. A healthier future should include new frameworks for broader understanding of what a “healthy return on investment” can mean. [Ibid, pg. 133.] The bottom line of pure profit is no longer the only or even most appropriate yardstick to use when judging investment potential.

Evidently, during the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, some outrageous amount of inheritance—upwards of \$42 trillion—will pass to younger generations. Estimates are that at least a third of this will go to people active in congregational life [Ibid, pg. 131], which looks to me like \$14 trillion of assets that might just want to be invested using religious values, hopefully some of which will be progressive.

So groups like the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility [<http://www.iccr.org>] are addressing this directly, by helping investor groups to spread ethical practices. [Ibid, pg. 134.] Progressive investment opportunities are emerging, such as the “Industries of the Future Fund” [[http://www.e-fundresearch.com/tmp/Sales\\_Aid.pdf](http://www.e-fundresearch.com/tmp/Sales_Aid.pdf)] and the CharityBank [<http://www.charitybank.org>], whose motto is “Banking for the Common Good.” Yes, the field of Socially Responsible Investing is alive, but it’s barely breathing. Healthy progress would suggest it be huffing and puffing, well fed at least by progressive religious people and their trillions.

This is a good segue to the second letter category in my acronym SEND: E is for **ETHICS**. As Gary Gardner puts it, “Without ethics, without a deep spiritual respect for life and for the planet that supports us, progress over the next 50 years will likely be little more than progressive decline.” [Ibid, pg. 39.]

Another word for ethics in this context would be justice, or even just “fairness.” Of course, the political bugaboo is about who gets to decide what’s fair. But even with that complication aside,

some things are pretty obvious, such as that certain countries at the top of the heap use up way more than what seems like their fair share of the now clearly limited global resources.

So where's the justice here? Do some of us humans *deserve* more than others? How do we approach this ethically? Can we live more simply so that others can simply live? Is it right for us to cluck about population control in the comfort of our relative luxury? It sure seems like the global dilemma that mixes increasing poverty with decreasing availability of clean water will have its ugly day unless we reverse those trends somehow, soon.

This sounds like a huge challenge, but reasonable estimates suggest that for the amount of money people in the US and Europe spend on pet food and cruises *in one year* we could eliminate global hunger and malnutrition and provide clean drinking water to all who need it. [Ibid, pg. 126.] So this means it's less a question of ability than will, which locates the issue squarely in the realm of ethics, as in what is morally right.

The bottom line is that ethical progress will be healthy for *all* people, not just for the ones who can afford it. And healthy for creatures, too. Our expanding human presence on the planet is certainly having a harsh impact on the creatures that share the surface with us.

Which helps me leave the dodgy subject of ethics and justice to get to the third letter in my acronym SEND: N is for **NATURE**. This, of course, is a rich field, but I have only two essential points to make here today.

First, the collective will of a people is powered by their world-view, which is always demonstrated by what matters to them—and what doesn't. Can enough of us humans internalize a worldview that allows nature and the rest of the planet to really matter to us? Can our basic assumption be one of humility, knowing that we are an integral part of nature, not separate from, better than, or able to control it?

To the extent we can effect this transformation of worldview, there will likely be healthy progress. All other measures may, in fact, lag behind this one, for it is pivotal.

My second point in this category is how such an *interdependent* planetary worldview might manifest in practical ways. I've become intrigued by what's called biomimicry, or, as the Biomimicry Institute [<http://www.biomimicryinstitute.org>] describes their mission: “...*learning from and then emulating natural forms, processes, and ecosystems to create more sustainable and healthier human technologies and designs.*”

This is not some feel-good sentimentalism about how beautiful nature is. This is hard science. We know, for instance, that bioregions are healthier the more diverse they are. So healthy human progress would mimic this age-old planetary wisdom in *our* communities.

Diversity then becomes not just something to tolerate or idealize, but actually a key to better health, as demonstrated by nature. Diversity helps bio-regions thrive; why shouldn't it be the same in our lives, our communities, our philosophy, if we seek similar health? That would be progress!

And in Nature, nothing is ever wasted. All waste is food somewhere else, a natural asset. If we factor this principle into our economies, locally and globally, we will find that “growth” is still quite possible and productive. It just happens within a grand balance, as in nature. Not “onward and upward forever,” but still growing in health and well-being. Progress should be toward balance, toward the lessons of nature, and we can make that happen.

Which brings me to the final letter in the new message we want to SEND to the future: D, for **DESIGN**. This word Design has risen up in my view to offer great hope. It urges the enormous creativity of our kind into action: we can indeed design our way forward. We need not be passive victims; we all have design capacities just begging to be engaged, especially, I think, toward the goal of sustainability and community well-being.

There are many, many great examples of how this is and can be done, through exciting innovations and systemic re-engineering that show the way. Some settings are designing more sustainable technology into new construction, such as the Gateway project currently underway near the Bainbridge ferry terminal. [<http://www.theislandgateway.com/environment-natural.php>]

And retrofits, while more complicated, are a growing field of endeavor and employment, already paying essential dividends, as some of you have no doubt found out yourselves. We can at least

design our households to be less wasteful. At almost every level, we can be productively creative and employ both tried-and-true as well as emerging techniques to good advantage. Progress should only enhance the design possibilities.

At one end of the spectrum of design empowerment might be the Amish over in the Mid-Atlantic region, who have been called “techno-selectives” because they choose very intentionally what portions of technology they will allow in their communities. [Ibid, pg. 116.] The guiding test the Amish use in making this determination is whether they believe any particular item or behavior will more likely bring them together or separate them.

I think this kind of value judgment is a useful tool. Try it yourself on any new technology in your world: does it bring people together or separate them? Judge whether something at issue builds community or erodes it—a useful lens toward healthy progress.

On a more global scale we have very important and uplifting statements like the abiding Universal Declaration of Human Rights [<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>], which some of us read aloud in public each December 10<sup>th</sup>, and the newer Earth Charter [<http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/>]. These are significant designs for the path forward, by which we can gauge our true progress.

Then there’s devices like the Well-Being Index [<http://www.well-beingindex.com/>], a recent Gallup creation that rates states and cities on six critical factors. You might be interested to know that WA State came in 15<sup>th</sup> (out of 50) in the 2009 Well-Being Index, but that’s quite a drop from being 7<sup>th</sup> the year before. Curiously, Seattle also dropped ranking of late while Bremerton rose in the comparative standings.

Anyway, these kinds of new priorities and yardsticks can help us purposefully design a healthier future, where our goal might be to creatively achieve the greatest well-being by acquiring the fewest goods possible. I like the short-and-sweet motto of the Center for a New American Dream: “More fun, less stuff.” [<http://www.newdream.org/>]

In such a progressive economy there would be strong, helpful growth in services toward well-being, not consumption. And there would also be more responsibilities attached to the rights of

property ownership. Balance and accountability to the whole, to the greater good would be our mentors.

I sense that any new message we SEND to the future, any vision of progress in holism and deeper relationships is likely to be anchored in an enduring activity of the heart: love. And this grounding has some historical allies, like Mahatma Gandhi, who not only encouraged us to “Be the change you want to see in the world.” He also reminded us that love power is greater than fear power.

*[“Power based on love is a thousand times more effective and permanent than the one derived from fear of punishment.”]*

This has never been more true than in our time, my friends, but there is and will be struggle involved—struggle both because of the accounts coming due also in our time, and because of significant forces aligned against this kind of health. We are a pivotal generation, facing the Perplexing Paradox of Progress, but we can bring our Spirit and Ethics into right relationship with Nature, and Design a path ahead that resonates with love power.

The late evolutionary biologist and historian, Stephen Jay Gould, sagely noted, “We won’t fight to save what we don’t love.” He encouraged us to form “an emotional and spiritual bond” between ourselves and nature. [Ibid, pg. 156.] May our lives feel the echo of our loving, our turning toward a future of healthy progress.

We carry on in abundant faith that there is indeed more love, more hope, more peace, more joy available to us at every turn, especially in community, so we pledge to keep working and singing for it, like right now. *There is More Love* is song #95...

